

Ohio State University commencement address by Bill Cosby

June 8, 2001

All right team, uh it's important to understand that you all are going to be special. Because I'm not going to talk about a journey, which is ridiculous. This is not the Iliad nor is it anyone's long days journey into anything. There is a great deal of humor here today. We're not going to talk about one step and I'm not going to tell you have to follow your dream—because half of you were drunk last night.

A dream is a dream. That's all it is. It has no order. And you have no memory when you wake up unless it was in fact a nightmare. People will tell you to follow; don't be afraid and I say that that's music for fools. I want you to be afraid but I want you to add some things to this wonderful, wonderful future you are going to have.

I want you to think back to the day you came, many of you to look at the campus to see if you wanted to come here. What a special, special thing for you. Did you pick your high school? Did you walk around to see if you wanted that high school? That prep school? No. They told you, this is where you are going. And so you walked around here..and many of you..this is isn't your first choice. Because you were not other schools first choice, so you're even.

Your parents, many of you, drove you here, with tears in their eyes that their child was going away. Many of the parents sitting around you when they dropped you off had feelings when they dropped you off—that you went someplace. Not that you were going to die but it just had something that had to do with..would you succeed. They were worried. And when they got back home they walked around and they looked at where you used to sit, where you used to run up the phone bill. And they talked w/ great love about your stupidity! Do you remember when she made..or when he blew up...and killed the goldfish..and they cried for you! And then you came home – more times than what they anticipated – and you took away things and never told them you had taken them. Making them feel dementia had arrived earlier. You stole things from your own parents - underwear, pieces of furniture, lamps, and you laughed and you pretended

But you were still their child and they put up with it.

Still to this day you have not sufficiently explained how you could get a credit card and they hadn't approved it. And you spent the money that these weird people said you could have. And so they paid your bills.

It is very strange, ladies and gentlemen, that we celebrate people who have graduated from college, yet they sit there at this commencement, broke and in debt. And these people are here... Yes! And listen to you cheering! There is a lack of integrity here. Let me say this again. You're broke! You're in debt! And you are a disappointment! These people sitting around you dressed in white brought you here for a reason, dammit. Not to come and get you. And they had to. Nobody else wanted you. You do not have jobs and most of you have gone back to whining all over again. This is not what they expected. When they first brought you here, they thought, my God, when you're finished you'll go on to greater heights. And now, you're saying, I really don't know if I want to do this.

Well here's the good news—for you parents—it's all right to push them. It's time—mothers, fathers, aunts and uncles, to push these people out of the nest. Give 'em three months then give them the address of the closest marine, army, navy..You can get your money back.

Now, let me help you. Don't come up and ask me for a job. I only take people after they've been out of college 10 years. They're mature.

Here's what I want you to do: It's all right if you don't have a job. It is not alright if you didn't look for one. What happen to the cheering? Okay, listen up. It's all right to take any job and then quit if you don't like it. But you've got to get out and begin to work. Those of you who will start as interns—understand that that's a French word for slave. But at least you will get to know some people who are working. Stay close to them. If you have a real job, and a real position, I want you to go to the janitor, to the lady cleaning out the trash. The lady sweeping up, the men and women you don't see. And I want you to take one or two of them just for a little break and say tell me about this place. You'll get an awful lot of information. Don't ask them how to run it just say tell me about this place. What's real? What isn't?

I will not tell you you will be the future of America. I don't know. Some of you will just sort of stay within the wallpaper of this United States. Some of you will never vote, some of you will vote. Some of you won't care. Some of you will have opinions and do nothing about it. Some of you will have many children. Some of you will take a step, fall, get up, go again, fall, get up and continue until you succeed. At what, I have no idea.

All I know is I had no idea of what I was going to do until I went into the service. It was there the first day of boot camp, the man came by, woke me at 4:30 in the morning, after telling me he was going to do that. I didn't believe him I thought I was still at home. And I told him how rude he was.

The man hit me with a stick on the bottom of the feet and said dammit I'm not your mother. And that's when I decided I was going to get out of the service. That I wanted to go to college and get an education and become a teacher. I was going to save these kids like myself. It is very very important. I found out my purpose in life by being hit on the feet at 4:30 in the morning. And being told to differentiate the behavior of a man with a stick and my who mother was; a different beating all together.

Those of you who carry your degree and are the first to graduate from college in your family: I want you to understand you know only what you know from walking around here. I want you to begin to listen to those elders in your family. I want you to listen to your mother or your father or whatever old *person* brought you up. These people happen to love you. I want you to stop listening to your friends. They only know what you know. Why would you follow somebody like that? There is a difference between your parents and your friends. Your friends will let you get drunk. Your parents will kick your *behind* if you come home half drunk. They seem to know what fits. They know how to *connect* the dots so that it is, in fact, a good picture. Pay attention to them because they in fact have more integrity. Even if your parents drink, smoke, or whatever. When they try to tell you about life, it is their act of life towards you. Believe it, they're trying to show you the shortest distance between 2 points. They care.

Integrity—keep that in the front. Every time you decide to do something just say integrity to yourself. I m not asking you to make *great* sacrifices. Just maintain a sense of integrity. Very very important because later on, *maybe* 20, 30, 40 years in your life, it may be important for people to look back over what *you* did. It may be important. And so integrity will always shine.

Enjoy yourselves, but don't go to extremes. You don't need to prove how much booze you can drink, how much cocaine you can snort, how many pills you can take, how long you can dance in a loud musical room with friends, how high you can pull your dress up, how low you can pull your trousers down. We don't want you to wait to outgrow it. We want you to start now. We don't ask you to be perfect. Enjoy yourself. We love to see you *smile*. And sometimes we love your weak excuses, they're cute.

I will show you the difference between an old person and a person in college. I was at Temple University. I had a political science professor named Dr. Leblonde and Dr Leblonde was wonderful. He was wonderful because he would go off the page. He'd come down from off one of the mathematical equations or philosophy and ask questions like what song would the Baltimore Orioles

sing if there were no Baltimore Orioles? And we would 3 hours arguing with each other until Professor Leblonde would say, well the answer is....

This one Tuesday—3 hours, Tuesdays and Thursdays, he stopped and he said, is the glass half full or half empty?. And we argued for 3 hours. And I felt so proud and happy to be in college. To be challenging my alpha waves. To be yelling at my constituents. My god, how great I felt. And as I rode the subway train home and looked at all these sad people on the subway who were not in college, I felt sorry for them. wanted to go to each one on the subway and say, listen, take a course in college, educate yourself, you need it. I went home. I couldn't get in the house. My mother wasn't home yet and I didn't have a key. My father said she wouldn't give me a key because she was practicing me for when I got married. I didn't understand that. A lot of times your parents will say things and you don't understand it. It will show up later. It takes a long time for it to come up under the microscope. But you won't need glasses to read it.

I went down to my grandmother and grandfather's house. Gertrude, that was her name 4 foot 9". Graduated from 3rd grade only. And I found her to be a wonderful woman who baked the best biscuits on face of this earth. I never knew her to say anything that would match Professor Leblonde. And she said, come on in she said and she was fixing bread. She was banging it and rolling it and throwing flour and when she wasn't satisfied with it she'd roll it and beat it and throw water on it and roll it and flour. And I was waiting for her. I wanted to take the glass and cut a biscuit and put it in and eat it and oh, boy.

But she kept asking me what I was doing, how are you doing in college? I didn't really want to say anything to her because Grandma's only 3rd grad education and I'm going to talk about Hegel's theory of dialectical materialism. My God, just..I'd blow her away. It's my Grandmother. She kept up the whole thing about what do you talk about there in college, there. She called it colliche. And finally I said well today grandmother we had the most enlightening conversation and argument and we debated for hours and still we have no answer to the question: is the glass half full or half empty. And my grandmother said..in amount of time..it depends on if you're drinking or pouring. Third grade education!

Those of us in those days had taken college boards in order to be allowed in. Third grade education! Many of them are sitting out there around you. They've come to take you home. Think about it. They brought you here but I don't think they brought you here to 4 years later take you home broke and in debt. But this is a part of college life. Oddly enough this is the way it goes. And guess

what? Never will you feel as much love and pride as you've given to those people sitting around you as today.

Why do I know this? Anytime you have a great, stressful situation. People use words like journey, going forth, and of course, Godspeed. You're in trouble when you hear those words.

And so, ladies and gentlemen of Ohio State University. Those are the people with jobs. It's a great day for you. Enjoy yourselves. I don't know how long you have to walk with them. I don't know what they want to see. But I'll tell you one thing. I want everybody to start today to fall in love with your parents. I want you to fall in love with integrity. And from my experience as a father and a child, I want you to fall in love with being honest with them. Because this is the only way they are going to be able to diagnose if there's a real problem. And this is the only way you're going to make a connection for the rest of your life with some people that you'll always be able to trust. And that doesn't mean they will give you everything you want. Because the day you become a parent you will understand that you're not supposed to. You're the parent. That's the child.

But fall in love with them and truly give all of yourself to them because they certainly have given to you and you are their future. Now that doesn't mean you have to go on and become a multi-multi-millionaire. That's the fun of being a parent.

I told a fellow. I had graduated from University of Massachusetts w/ a doctorate in education. When it was over, my mother knocked down a security guard and she's 4'11 came and grabbed me and hugged me. Ladies and gentlemen, I was making, averaging 3 million dollars a year. Just received an earned doctorate in education, Ed.D. and my mother said to me, now I can die and go on away because I know you have something to fall back on.
Good luck.